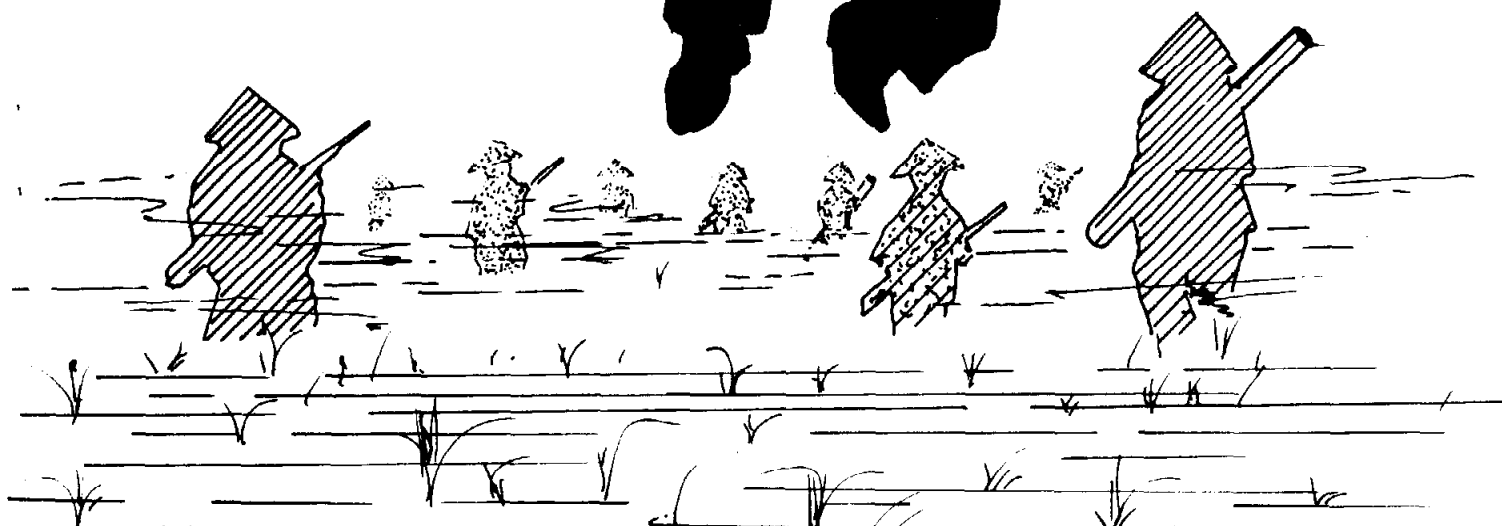


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# COUNTERINSURGENCY

LESSONS

LEARNED  
DEFENSE

NO. 67



HEADQUARTERS  
UNITED STATES MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND, VIETNAM  
APO 96222

MACJ343

4 April 1968


SUBJECT: Counterinsurgency Lessons Learned No. 67: Defense

TO: SEE DISTRIBUTION

1. Attached for your information is a "Lessons Learned" from current counterinsurgency operations in South Vietnam.
2. The information contained in this "Lessons Learned" may be of value for direct application to training, or to reinforce existing doctrine, based on combat experience in South Vietnam.
3. Comments or questions concerning the document, or requests for changes or additions in the distribution of Lessons Learned, should be addressed to this headquarters, Attention: MACJ343.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

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1. Lessons Learned No. 67
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J. J. AYWARD, JR.  
Major, USA  
Asst AG



## COUNTERINSURGENCY LESSONS LEARNED NO. 67

DEFENSE1. INTRODUCTION:

a. The purpose of this lessons learned is to review concepts of defense as currently practiced in South Vietnam (SVN). The enemy and his tactics, the terrain, and the weather are somewhat different from those previously encountered by US forces, but the defensive concepts, that have proven to be most successful in Vietnam, are the same ones that have proven successful in other areas in the past. Minor variations to adjust to local conditions, as outlined in most defensive doctrinal publications, are all that is necessary to provide friendly forces with the necessary fundamentals of a good defensive posture. The full utilization of new equipment and weapons makes the situation even more favorable for the defender. With the equipment now available to the ground force units in SVN, only a lack of initiative, imagination or alertness on the part of the local commander can limit the units defensive capability.

b. Combat is a good training ground and the VC/NVA are good teachers. If a commander makes a mistake on the battlefield, the teacher loses no time in bringing it to his attention, the hard way. As our leaders rotate out of combat units, their battle-won wisdom rotates with them. The enemy, on the other hand has been fighting the same war, with many of the same people, for several years and retains this knowledge, that he has learned by experience. In many cases he conducts an operation at his convenience and often only after very detailed planning, training, equipping, and rehearsing. The defensive techniques covered here are not new, but they have been tried and tested again in the SVN environment and have proven their validity.

2. ENEMY TACTICS: The enemy has developed a pattern of preparations that he has generally followed prior to an attack on a friendly position. He may use any or all of the following to determine the strength and disposition of a defensive position:

a. Sniper Fire. This is generally used for harassment, and to determine reactions. Automatic weapons positions and types, may be determined from the returned fire, and troops in the open will immediately take cover, disclosing the location of available prepared positions.

b. Harassing Fires. These are used for registration of various weapons as well as to produce casualties. They are also used against nearby units during the attack to prevent these units from assisting the unit under attack.

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c. Probes. Small unit probes are often used to determine avenues of approach, location and types of close-in barriers (tactical wire, trip wires, mines and booby traps), location of individual and automatic weapons positions, and detection capabilities of the defenders. A favorite ruse of the enemy after penetrating a perimeter, is to throw stones or dirt at or near a friendly position. When an individual reveals his position by firing a weapon or throwing a hand grenade, he often receives an enemy grenade in return. An increase in the number of probing actions is a good indication that an attack is imminent.

d. Preparation for the Attack.

(1) When the enemy has determined the disposition of forces, and the location of key weapons, bunkers, tactical wire, supporting weapons, and other items for destruction, he will often reorganize his force to meet the requirements for a particular attack. Specialists will be assigned missions according to damage desired and grenadiers and/or sappers will be assigned to breach tactical wire and destroy key targets. When time permits, the entire attack including the withdrawal, is carefully planned and rehearsed before it is executed.

(2) After the enemy has approached as near as possible to the friendly position, he will usually fire a preparation with supporting weapons. Due to the difficulty of ammunition resupply and the friendly counterbattery capability, the preparation will be fired quickly and with maximum intensity, to permit assault elements to move to the assault position. In some cases it has been reported that the enemy troops have started the assault before the preparatory fires were completed. However, it has also been reported that initial assault troops carried satchel charges and grenades that when detonated, appeared to be a continuation of the preparatory fires. This technique kept many of the defenders in their covered positions, and resulted in casualties from grenades dropped or thrown inside friendly bunkers. In some cases the enemy has been well inside the perimeter before the defenders came out of their covered positions to engage him with fire.

e. Assault.

(1) Normally, the enemy will assault as soon as preparatory fires are lifted or shifted. The assault is usually supported by heavy machine guns, B-40 and B-41 rocket launchers, and mortars. The assault is usually led by submachine gunners, accompanied by sappers to breach wire and destroy fortified positions. Some recent reports have indicated that the initial assault wave consisted primarily of grenadiers armed with B-40 and B-41 rocket launchers. This would give the impression that preparatory fires had not been lifted when the assault started. The initial wave of of sapper teams proceed directly to their preplanned objectives, i.e.,

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command centers, communications centers, artillery pieces, crew-served weapons, ammunition supply points, vehicles and/or aircraft, or other lucrative targets.

(2) The main assault may be preceded by a feint or preliminary assault on a part or parts of the position away from the area of the main effort, in the hope that friendly forces will displace to the area, leaving the primary penetration route with a minimum of defenders and weapons. This assault is rehearsed, supported by machine guns and mortars, and given all the support of the main assault except numbers of personnel. Early displacement of reserves, or internal shifting of forces to counter this threat may leave the primary objective area only lightly defended.

(3) The submachine gunners cover the movement of sappers to their objectives with fire. Grenades or small charges are thrown or fired into occupied bunkers, and any resistance is neutralized by submachine gun fire and/or grenades. If the first assault is repulsed, a second assault may follow after a brief period of reorganization. In some cases, a third assault has been attempted after the first two have failed.

(4) If the assault is successful, and the position has been neutralized, the enemy then begins the exploitation. Bunkers are searched. Weapons, ammunition, communication equipment, packs, rations, and any other useable equipment are carried off. He also removes his dead and wounded, and often will return to the battle area several times after an attack to complete this mission if friendly forces do not quickly reoccupy the area. A sweep of the battle area as soon as possible after the action will often catch the enemy retrieving his dead, wounded and equipment.

f. The Withdrawal. The withdrawal is usually covered by a small force armed with automatic weapons, normally the same force that supported the initial attack. After the assaulting unit has passed back through its lines, this covering force withdraws, using mortar fire to cover its withdrawal. Only in rare instances has the enemy attempted to hold an objective that has been taken from friendly forces, and in most cases these positions were evacuated within a matter of hours.

### 3. DEFENSIVE COUNTERMEASURES.

#### a. Intelligence.

(1) One of the greatest advantages to the friendly forces is advance notice of an impending attack. This allows the local commander to make all-out preparations and to be at maximum readiness when the attack occurs. Information on enemy capabilities such as strength, supporting fire capabilities, special weapons (flame throwers, rocket launchers,

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bangalores, etc.), as well as the probable time and direction of the attack offer a tremendous advantage to the defender.

(2) In many cases this information is available from reasonably reliable sources, and, if exploited in time, can keep friendly casualties to a minimum while inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. Good, reliable, and timely intelligence can be a major factor in determining the outcome of any action.

(3) A good example of the value of intelligence occurred recently in the IV Corps area. A district headquarters received a warning that a PF outpost would be attacked within 48 hours. The district chief dispatched a platoon of 30 men to locate the enemy and, if possible, to conduct a spoiling attack. The friendly platoon, in single file for control purposes, was moving through a lightly wooded area toward a suspected enemy assembly area. At the same time, a VC force from the assembly area had started to move out to attack the friendly position, and was moving in the opposite direction through the same wooded area on a parallel trail, about 100 meters away. The lead elements of the two columns passed each other without detection. Then the lead element of the VC column made contact with the rear element of the GVN force. When the action started the VC were caught completely by surprise and moved to engage a force to their front. The friendly platoon leader, with the bulk of his forces already past the point of contact, immediately mounted an attack against the flank of the VC column. Heavy casualties were taken by the VC, who finally broke and ran, leaving 17 dead, and assorted weapons and equipment. There were no friendly casualties. The remainder of the VC company dispersed after this action, and the outpost was not attacked. The fact that the GVN platoon leader was aware that the VC force might be in the area gave him a big advantage in this particular action.

b. Area Selection. The first priority in the selection of a defensive position is to choose an area that can be defended. When possible, a thorough reconnaissance should be made to determine possible avenues of approach, fields of fire, LZs and DZs for emergency resupply, cover, and concealment. In many cases this is not possible due to tactical considerations, darkness, or other factors. However, in any given area a certain amount of advantage may be gained by making maximum use of the terrain at hand. Often, a move of a short distance will present tactical advantages for a company or platoon defensive perimeter.

c. Perimeter Defense.

(1) All unit defensive positions should provide for all-around security. The enemy's infiltration capability is such that friendly

units, even though mutually supporting, have been attacked simultaneously from the area between the positions thus negating the mutual support.

(2) The defensive sectors defending against the primary avenues of enemy approach should be organized first, followed by the organization of the sectors covering the probable secondary avenues of approach.

d. Individual Position Selection. After the general concept of defense has been defined, crew-served weapons should be emplaced where they can be used most effectively in the overall defense. These weapons should be deployed in depth and protected by riflemen. The remaining riflemen and fire teams should be used to provide additional depth and to fill in gaps. Other gaps in a fire coverage should be filled in with supporting fires.

e. Fields of Fire. Fields of fire should be considered when selecting weapons positions. The gunner or rifleman should be able to observe and to cover with fire his assigned area from his position. Automatic weapons should be positioned so that grazing fire can be delivered laterally across the front of his positions, to block an enemy assault. Machine guns should be mutually supporting and reinforced by riflemen, who can fire along final protective lines during temporary stoppages of the automatic weapons. Gaps in the final protective lines should be covered by mortar barrages, and the entire defensive fire plan reinforced with artillery fire along the avenues of approach. Position preparation and fields of fire clearance should be accomplished simultaneously.

f. Position Preparation.

(1) Fighting holes and bunkers should be dug deep enough to allow an individual to get well below ground level for protection against artillery or mortar fire. The spoil should be used to make a protective berm to deflect direct fire. Bunkers should be dug in so that when overhead cover is added, the lowest possible silhouette is offered to the enemy. Firing apertures should be wide enough to fire through to protect the bunker, cover the approaches to nearby bunkers and to offer good field of observation. Firing ports to the direct front should be avoided if possible. All positions should be camouflaged, and the camouflage changed as necessary to conceal the position.

(2) One unit, that has been particularly successful in defensive actions, prepares its positions with firing apertures to the left and right front rather than directly to the front. This requires mutual support by adjoining positions, but the resulting crossfire effect has proven advantageous. An open area in the rear of the position permits grenades to be fired or thrown and provides for all around observation.

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g. Overhead Cover. Overhead cover should be prepared for all positions as soon as practicable. This provides not only a defense against enemy fires, but permits use of friendly VT or time fuze fires on the position in case of penetration. It also provides protection against the elements. Sufficient firing ports should be prepared in all positions, to permit each individual and crew-served weapon to fire. Auxiliary fighting holes outside the main bunkers should be prepared to reinforce the primary position and to permit alternate firing positions in case of damage to the bunker.

h. Armor Support. Tanks, armored personnel carriers and armored cars within the perimeter can add mobility and firepower to the defense. However, precautions to protect these vehicles must be taken. When possible, they should be dug in. Several positions for the vehicles should be prepared, and a final position for the night defense should not be taken until after dark. Infantry firepower should be used to protect the vehicle and only the necessary gun crews should occupy the vehicle when it is used in the defensive role. Alternate and supplementary positions should be used during daylight hours. Camouflage of these vehicles is a must.

i. Supporting Fires.

(1) The primary source of fire support is from those weapons controlled by the commander on the ground. These should have primary consideration, followed by plans for the use of supplementary supporting fires, such as artillery and tactical air support. All supporting fires should be registered as soon as possible so that an immediate response can be provided when requested. Areas should be delineated so that tactical air support, gunship support, and artillery support can be used simultaneously, when available. Planning for artillery fire 1500-2000 meters in the rear of the enemy to cut off his reinforcements during the attack, and to slow his withdrawal after the attack should be included.

(2) Several instances of maximum use of supporting fires has been reported. One company on a search and destroy mission was surrounded by a much larger force. The company moved into a deserted village and set up a hasty perimeter. The village was located on the west side of an identifiable road. After due consideration of the locations of the supporting artillery, targets on the east side of the road were assigned to tactical air fighter planes. The north side of the village was assigned for gunship coverage, and the south side reserved for artillery. By close control of the fires, all three of the supporting systems were used simultaneously. The company inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy and forced his withdrawal.

j. Barrier Planning and Construction.

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(1) The planning for any defensive position should include a plan for a barrier. A hasty defensive position may be augmented by concertina, claymore mines, trip flares, and improvised noise makers. Warning devices, improvised if necessary, should always be included.

(2) When time permits, a more elaborate barrier system can be employed, depending on the availability of material. Barbed wire can be employed extensively in a variety of fences. Concertina can be used as a secondary obstacle line inside the other barbed wire. In an extensive position the concertina should be moved from place to place, after dark, to confuse the enemy as to its actual location, and to channelize his assault. All tactical wire should be checked daily to assure that it has not been cut and repaired with break-away connectors to assist in breaching.

(3) Claymore mines - Proper emplacement of claymore mines can often stop an assault before it fully develops. They should be placed close-in to the perimeter, within the tactical wire, where they can be kept under observation and covered with fire. They should be moved to a new position each night. Firing should be delayed until the enemy is well within the killing zone of the claymore.

(4) Night observation devices - Night observation devices should be deployed using the same principles as supporting weapons. The most effective ones should be used on the most dangerous approaches. Obstacles should be removed to permit maximum coverage. A dug in position should be prepared with alternate, secondary and supplementary positions as required. Supporting weapons, with an effective range equal to, or greater than, the observation device, should be immediately available to engage targets detected.

(5) Fougasse - Fougasse can be used in various sized containers and should be employed in the same manner as claymore mines, that is, emplaced within the tactical wire, moved frequently, checked daily, and command detonated.

(6) Trip flares - Trip flares in the area are most effective when used in conjunction with tactical wire, and when masked from direct observation by friendly forces.

(7) Intrusion detection devices - There are several different kinds of intrusion detection devices now in use and others being tested. These can be used to give additional extended coverage, and to reinforce other defensive measures. One particularly worthy of note is the Scout Dog. It has been described as the most effective 360 degree sensor available. It is also self-powered, uncomplicated, cost effective, requires little maintenance, no formal education and only a few weeks training. It is

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claimed that none of these dogs has ever been ambushed. They have also proven to be a valuable asset when included as part of a friendly ambush, particularly at night or, when used in open areas around the perimeters of large base complexes.

(8) Illumination - There are several methods of providing battlefield illumination. The most common are mortar and artillery illuminating rounds, aircraft flares, trip flares, and searchlights. Defensive planning should include provisions for lighting the battlefield on order. Infra-red shields for searchlights are available for some models and can be used for battlefield scanning and target detection prior to white light illumination. Continuous white light illumination is often a deterrent to attacks.

(9) Hand grenade volleys - The Marines use a technique of throwing hand grenades by squad volleys. On command all members throw a hand grenade and take cover. Area coverage is good and very few are thrown back.

k. Development.

(1) The defensive development of a position should be continuous. Individual and crew-served weapons positions should be continually improved. Overhead cover should be added as soon as possible. Fields of fire should be expanded. Bunkers should be large enough to provide space for the number of people in the bunker to have 50% on alert and 50% resting. Communication trenches should be dug to permit access to and from the bunkers under fire. Drainage ditches should be dug to permit water to run off, rather than into the bunker. Camouflage material should be carefully selected. If possible, the underbrush or grass should be carefully removed where the position is to be prepared, and replaced after the position has been completed so that it will continue its natural growth, and blend in with the surrounding foliage. Placing the position at the base of a tree or behind some natural cover will simplify the camouflage requirements later.

(2) Alert forces - There are no safe havens in Vietnam. Particularly where the terrain makes it possible for the enemy to maneuver close to friendly forces without detection. All units should assume that they are being observed 24 hours a day, and that any slip in security will be a costly one. Many times, positions are occupied without any sign that the enemy is even in the area. This is exactly what he intends for you to believe. Complacency cannot be tolerated. Several units have been ambushed in "safe" areas, where they had operated previously without contact. Headquarters, at all echelons of command, have been attacked. Many with serious results. Therefore, all units should presume that they will be attacked, and should plan accordingly. When operating in the field, the commander

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should not ponder whether or not he will be attacked, but rather from which direction and by how large a force.

1. Counterattack Plan.

(1) Every defensive position should have a counterattack plan to recover the position or any part of it that might be overrun. When positions are properly organized in sufficient depth, the commander will have a small reserve which he can use to reinforce or to counterattack a penetrated area.

(2) Rehearsal of these plans, particularly after dark, is most important in developing control measures.

m. Patrolling and Ambushes.

(1) Continuous aggressive patrolling of the defensive perimeter is a must, particularly during the initial preparation of the position. This will keep the enemy clear of the position until it is organized, and give the unit time to make initial preparations. In case of contact with a large unit, a patrol can give warning and fight a delaying action back to its perimeter, perhaps even luring the enemy into an ambush. Enemy patrols do this frequently.

(2) Ambushes should also be established to prevent the enemy's approach to the position while it is being prepared. Often a well planned small unit ambush can inflict heavy casualties and disrupt the attack plans of a much larger unit.

(3) Listening posts and combat outposts should be established outside the perimeter during periods, and in areas, of limited visibility in order to warn the main position of the enemy's approach. These positions should be equipped with a reliable communication system and be able to move to and from the main position after dark. A silent communication code should be employed. One unit uses a squelch break radio system. By depressing the "press to talk switch" on the common infantry radios, the normal static on the receiver within the perimeter is interrupted. A given number of breaks is used to signal that everything is alright, another series for an alert. The monitor within the perimeter then asks questions that can be answered yes or no. The listening post would answer using a code for yes or no.

(4) Units outside the perimeter during an attack may be able to attack the flank or rear of the enemy by displacing laterally for a short distance. Surprise flanking fire on the attacking enemy may be of tremendous assistance to the defending force. It may also be possible to

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ambush the attackers when they withdraw, if their route of withdrawal can be determined. Effective communications and coordination is a must in this case to prevent the ambush forces from masking friendly supporting fires.

n. Other Considerations.

(1) Priorities - The requirement to get the troops into positions meeting minimum protective requirements must be the first priority, regardless of all other considerations. Waiting until after chow, or taking a break before positions are prepared, is a gamble with all the odds against the defender. Depending on the actual location and other local considerations preparation of fields of fire, position preparation, positioning of combat outposts, patrolling, and coordination of supporting fires should be accomplished simultaneously.

(2) Light and noise discipline - The VC/NVA are masters at infiltration, and therefore can take advantage of any lapses in basic disciplines on the part of friendly forces. It does not take him long to locate friendly positions. When he does, he immediately attempts to determine the size of the force and the disposition. If he feels he can successfully attack the position he will immediately plan to do so. Breaches of light and noise discipline simplify this requirement for him and should not be tolerated.

o. Command and Control.

(1) A key factor in any successful action is effective communication. The commander must be kept informed of all actions in and around the perimeter. Each echelon must be able to communicate with higher and lower echelons. Wire should be laid when possible and time permits, and radios used as back-up. Patrols, ambushes, combat outposts, and listening posts must be able to communicate with the main position. All methods of communication should be checked frequently and repaired or replaced as necessary. Since the enemy has developed a good capability for monitoring and interception of our radio communications, and has employed Imitative Communications Deception (ICD) tactics on several occasions, strict adherence to SOI and SSI is required.

(2) Commanders, at all echelons must be located where they can best influence the action. The senior commander on the ground cannot delegate the responsibility for organizing the position. In particular, he must control direct support artillery and air support, and other key weapons. In some cases it has proven expedient for the company commander on the ground to direct, through his Forward Observer, the close-in supporting fires, while the battalion commander, from his air observation post, directs the supporting fires beyond the observation of the party on the ground.

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p. Pursuit.

(1) When the defense has repelled the enemy and he begins his withdrawal, pursuit should be considered. As a rule the enemy has suffered casualties, is low on ammunition, may be disorganized and physically fatigued following an attack. This makes him a prime target for a counterattack and pursuit.

(2) Initially, he should be pursued by fire, using artillery and tactical air support. When his routes of withdrawal are determined, combat patrols should attempt to follow and maintain contact. Caution should be exercised, because he is an expert at covering his withdrawal, and a small pursuing force may end up being ambushed by the enemy rear guard.

(3) The most successful pursuits have been made by reaction forces who have conducted airmobile operations in LZ's well in front of the fleeing enemy and then have attacked back toward the friendly perimeter, squeezing the enemy in the middle. Ambushes and reinforced combat patrols to the flank have succeeded in springing ambushes as he breaks down into small groups and attempts to exfiltrate. The main objective is to keep him away from his base area where he can regroup, reorganize and resupply. Successive airmobile operations to keep him on the move have proven to be the most effective pursuit technique.

4. SUMMARY: Current defensive actions in Vietnam have proven that our current doctrine is sound. The defensive training as now conducted by our military training centers is basically correct. The flexibility inherent in the concepts allows the commander on the ground sufficient latitude to adjust to local conditions. The conditions of terrain, from high steep mountains to broad low alluvial plains; the weather, alternating monsoon and dry seasons; and the vegetation, from heavy jungle with visibility limited to 10 meters to rice paddy areas where visibility is unlimited, place a premium on the interpretation and understanding of the basic tenets of defense. The available firepower, equipment, transportation and other support, offer the commander a real challenge in the conduct of operations against an unusual, but very capable enemy. The success of a defensive action is directly proportionate to how well the commander applies these basic concepts.



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